

By Dave Neale, PhD.

***We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made.***

The series is based on the idea that when we say the Creed we should know what we are saying; and that when we say it we should mean it. We must come to believe it.

Now please bear with me. I don't believe that you need to hear a sermon this morning declaring the Jesus is the Son of God. If you are here you either believe it, or don't particularly believe but are curious or attracted to church for some other reason. Your mom made you come!

We all know that we believe that Jesus is the Son of God. The Creed is exactly that, the assertion, the proclamation of that doctrine. But we need to understand what we are saying.

But, of course, most people in our time do **not** believe that Jesus is the Son of God, even though they believe in transcendence in some form.<sup>1</sup> The number of Canadians who identify as Christians fell from 83% in 1991 to below 67% in 2011. "No religious affiliation grew from 13% to 24% during that period.

We assert that Jesus is the Son of God. But fewer and fewer people believe us. We need to know what we are saying.

So here is what I'm going to do today.

- 1700 years of the history of the idea – in 2 minutes
- The theology of the matter
- I/We – Why should we believe today?

### **Early development of the idea<sup>2</sup>**

Constantine's motive for convening a conference to settle the matter was perhaps out of piety, but it was also for political motive to unite his empire, east and west, in a creed which was to "stand as a measure of orthodoxy for the entire Christian community"<sup>3</sup>

We can't know if the man was pious or an astute political being, perhaps he was both. But it is without question that the Nicene Creed has been the symbol of the heart of Christian theology for these many centuries. An amazingly good thing!

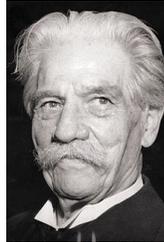
### **How traditional Christians lost the field on the sonship of Jesus**

How did we lose our way in modernity with respect to the identity of Jesus?

In the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century a gulf began to emerge in the minds of some between the synoptic gospels and the writings of Paul. See my notes on line for the history of that debate.<sup>4</sup>

But perhaps we will pause to consider a major figure in the last hundred years of the debate on the historical Jesus. The historical Jesus discussions of the 80s and 90s were a part of common culture. Jesus was quite the thing. I used to carry half a dozen Time magazine covers into my Jesus of Nazareth course at Ambrose and throw them on the table.

Albert Schweitzer, is best known for his work later in life in Gabon (French Equatorial Africa), but less known is that by the age of thirty he had established himself as a renowned organist and scholar. He held three doctorates (Theology, Philosophy and Medicine). He attained the status of Professor of Theology at a young age in Strasbourg, and wrote a book titled, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* in 1910. He believed that Jesus was, in fact, an historical figure (a view today accepted as the "assured result of scholarship"). But he did not believe Jesus was the risen Christ of the church.



This is how the historical figure of Jesus came to be shorn in the modern mind of his divinity.

But even if you do not accept the church's claim that Jesus is the risen messiah, you should acquaint yourself with his life and teachings (Matthew, Mark, Luke and John). The ethics and love of Jesus is what fueled Schweitzer's life of service to others.

You will find a Jesus who is the most compelling figure in history, a man of peace dedicated to love of fellow human beings, whose life was a testimony to the loving kindness of God, and a man who welcomed the outcasts of his time into an intimate relationship with God, and the promise of the Kingdom of Heaven for all who seek God, on earth and in the world to come.

No person can be considered literate without a knowledge of the life of Jesus of Nazareth. But of course, we go far, far beyond our admiration for the life and teachings of Jesus when we declare that he is the Son of God.

### **The theology of the matter**

There is a narrative here in the Creed – it is a story with a structure. God as Maker, God as Son, God as Spirit, the Spirit in the church. Our problem is the inadequacy of language to capture the mystical reality of biblical theology of which the Creed speaks.<sup>5</sup>

### ***We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God...***

Judaism, Christianity and Islam are in the Judeo-Christian tradition. We share the belief that there is one God. We share a moral code based on the law of Moses. We all recognize the prophets of God from the Hebrew Bible, and for Muslims, the NT.<sup>6</sup>

When it comes to Jesus, we differ from Jewish religion not in the *idea* that there is to be a messiah, but in the *identity* of the messiah. Put another way, The Way (early Christians) was a messianic movement just as Judaism was and is (at least in some forms). We just differ on the timing. We think Jesus is the promised messiah and Jews believe the messiah is yet to come. Thus, here we declare what definitively defines us vis á vis Judaism.

Here in the second paragraph of the Creed things get very complicated very quickly. We encounter mystery in this sentence - a mystical magnitude which our mere language cannot adequately describe. The language becomes a *symbol* for the transcendent realities we seek to describe.

In addition to saying God is Father, we now say in the second paragraph that God is Son, and then later that God is Holy Spirit.

We call this the doctrine of the Trinity. It is quite inscrutable, everyone agrees, how God can be three in one. One in three persons (steam, water, ice is one analogy).

The question that arises in our phrase here is how can God become present in the physical world by means of the life of the man, Jesus of Nazareth. How can it be that Jesus of Nazareth was God incarnate?

We are now expressing exactly what is unique about our faith in comparison to every other religion on the planet.

The whole purpose of the Creed is to assert that Jesus is both divine and human at the same time. This is the mystery of trinitarian theology of Christendom. It has been the mystery for 2000 years and it will be for the next, if the Lord tarries.

We stop, we consider, we look again and again, but we cannot really comprehend what this means. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, “Even as we affirm the statements of the creed as true, we know that they [the words] point to a reality beyond our understanding. We profess our faith not in the words but in the reality to which they point.”<sup>7</sup>

I think this transcendent aspect of our theology is what draws us to a higher experience of life.

This next phrase is a declaration of Jesus’ ontology, that is, the nature of his being **...eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father.**

These words are the “least intelligible” to the modern reader of the Creed.<sup>8</sup> Why does the Creed use this begotten language? (You’ll notice that in the very compressed version of the Apostles’ Creed, this language is not present).

The theological disputations of the early Christian centuries (1<sup>st</sup>-4<sup>th</sup>) are not of particular interest to us – this language comes from a problem that the fourth century church was grappling with as Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine. As I have said, he convened the Council of Nicaea to address a crisis created by the teaching of an Egyptian (Alexandria) presbyter named Arius. He held that Jesus was a creature, not of one being with the Father, because it was impossible that God would share God’s essence. Thus, the Word of God (Jesus) cannot be fully God, but is only a creature of God.

So this language, **begotten...God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God...not made, of one being with the Father,** is the church’s definitive declaration in the classic doctrine of the Trinity. It is also an affirmation of the inscrutable mystery which this language represents, and it has settled the matter for the past 1700 years.

**God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God.** What a beautiful language to assert what is beyond all imagination about the nature of Jesus the Son.

And to say **Through him all things were made** it to reaffirm that the Son was present as the Creator, not merely a creature of God. Here you will recognize how this resonates from the Gospel of John.<sup>9</sup>

***In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.***

### **The I/We: Why Should We “Believe” Today**

The series is based on the idea that when we say the Creed we should know what we are saying; and that when we say it we should mean. We must come to believe it.

I/We. There is a very significant difference in which way we understand the Creed. You take it as a personal basis of meaning and identity. And so you should. But Western civilization’s, that is the European/North American focus on individuality, the “I” of life.

There is a popular form of speaking today when we wish to assert our sense of authenticity/identity. We say, ‘I feel like \_\_\_\_\_’. ‘...you aren’t hearing me; what you say doesn’t resonate with me; what you are doing is wrong.’

I think the Creed puts the emphasis on the “We.” There is and has been a standard form of expression of the faith for 1700 years since the Creed was written. That expression was based on 300 years of Christian life and suffering and teaching and evangelism following the life, death and resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth. There is a chain of tradition 2000 years old. It is a “we” tradition. And when we say it together, that is the true meaning of the Creed.

One word that has been used for the Creed is “symbol.” We hear the voices of those who have gone before us. They are the “great cloud of witnesses” as the Book of Hebrews says.

[Insert Slide on Tradition.]

The word symbol comes from the Greek word *symbollein*. One of the meanings of the word is to join two objects such as “(a ring, tablets, seals) as a sign of recognition and reception of others, and therefore as signifying a treaty. This term points to the way the creed provides a sign of reception and membership, and a way of affirming the community’s shared story.”<sup>10</sup>

So by saying the creed at baptism in our Nazarene liturgy (the only place it occurs in our Manual) we proclaim that we have received the tradition of the creed and we covenant to pass it on to others. The declaration of the Creed is profoundly “we.”

That is identity. That is meaning. That is the ground of our being.

I leave you with this thought on the importance of the Creed for us.

Do you remember how, after the shepherds came and reported that they had seen angels announcing the birth: ***But Mary treasured all these words and pondered*** (συμβάλλουσα) ***them in her heart*** Luke 2. This is another aspect of the meaning of the word.

We ponder the Creed. We treasure all these words in our hearts. We reflect, we feel, we explore, sometimes we doubt, we feel joy.

We talk about “meaning,” we talk about “identity,” we talk about the “life of Jesus.”

To believe means that we engage all of our faculties: the Scriptures, our reason, our traditions and our experience to proclaim our relationship to God.

God responds to the believer with the succor and presence of the Holy Spirit.

**“This,” he said, “is what you have heard from me; for John baptized with water, but you will be baptized with the Holy Spirit not many days from now”** (Acts 1:4-5).

**And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Helper, to be with you for ever** (John 14:16).<sup>11</sup>

<sup>1</sup> From 1991 to 2011 the percentage of Canadians who identified from Christians fell from 83% to 67%. The number of Christians in the country dropped only slightly, but the population grew by 6 million people. So we are losing ground. “No religious affiliation” rose from 13% to 24% during that same period. The rest of the population in 2011 (8%) were of other religions.

<sup>2</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson says “the order of the exposition of the creed is not the order of discovery” of the sonship of Jesus by the first followers. That is, the first followers took quite some time after the resurrection to formalize a belief that he was the promised Messiah of the Hebrew Bible. The doctrine of the sonship of Jesus seems to have been well established by the time of Paul, the earliest writer of the NT. But it took a couple of decades for the idea to crystalize. And in this reality, some have questioned whether the church got it right – one of the biggest debates of the modern era with respect to Jesus. See *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, p.104 ff.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, pp. 32-33.

<sup>4</sup> A gulf between the synoptic gospels and Paul. One figure from the 18<sup>th</sup> century changed the world. Herman Samuel Reimarus (d. 1874 pictured below) who wrote a book read only by a few close friends because it would have made him an outcast in his day, but published after he died, in a volume called *Fragments*. He was a deist (someone who believes in God, but that he does not act in history), and basically said the church appropriated the historical figure of Jesus and turned him into a Christ figure, and that Paul was the main proponent of this view of Jesus.



David Friedrich Strauss in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, d. 1874 “...was a German liberal Protestant theologian and writer, who influenced Christian Europe with his portrayal of the historical Jesus, whose divine nature he denied. His work revolutionized study of the New Testament, early Christianity, and ancient religions. Strauss was a pioneer in the historical investigation of Jesus.”

<sup>6</sup> 56% of the world’s population are Christian (31%)/Muslim (25%)/Jewish (.2%). So more than half the world accepts the first line of the Creed, but only 31% of the world accepts the second paragraph of the creed.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, p. 56.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, p. 129.

<sup>9</sup> The references to Jesus as the eternal Son of God are actually rather few in the gospel tradition. Esp in the synoptic gospels (Matthew, Mark and Luke). We have the opening statements in Matthew and Mark of course. But during his life it seems to have been an emerging idea that the disciples did not comprehend. The most striking Christological passage in the synoptics is Luke 10:23 and its parallels in Matthew and Mark. Otherwise, see John 20:28. Outside the gospels see Phil 2:5-11; 1 Tim 2:5-7; 1 Cor 8:4-6, 12:4-6 for the clearest Christological statements.

<sup>10</sup> Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Creed: What Christians Believe and Why it Matters*, p. 52.

<sup>11</sup> Also John 14:26; 15:26; 16:7.